

## Former CEO: 'We are at a crisis point now'

### Denise Coffey

Cape Cod Times USA TODAY NETWORK

Stephen Lavallee has been working nearly 80 hours a week for the past two years as a Latham Centers residential manager— juggling his management duties and providing direct care to clients because the nonprofit has lost so many staff during the pandemic.

"We've been spread so thin that managers have had to step in as direct care staff," he said.

Latham Centers schools, group homes and programs serve intellectually disabled girls and boys with special needs, as well as children and adults with Prader- Willi Syndrome. They aren't the only nonprofit struggling to attract and retain direct care staff. Every organization that is part of the Cape Cod Disability Network, including Cape Abilities, Community Connections and Life Inc. are having the same trouble.

The network's approximately 900 employees — when fully staffed — work with an estimated 1,850 intellectually and developmentally disabled children and adults in school, day habilitation programs, supported work programs and group homes throughout the Cape.

**"We're expected to lose 24,000 people. That's the working population. The macro picture is — things are tough in Massachusetts. They're tougher on the Cape because of affordable housing, the higher cost of living, and young people leaving."**

### Jack Kelly

Board of Directors member at Latham Centers



**Stephen Lavallee, manager of the Latham Group Home, stands outside the facility on Feb. 17 in Sandwich. Lavallee has been working nearly 80 hours a week for the past two years due to staffing issues.** STEVE HEASLIP/CAPE COD TIMES

Continued from Page 1A

cover the cost of living on Cape Cod where housing, let alone affordable, is in short supply. Disability advocates are calling for a

host of measures to ensure this vulnerable population is taken care of. They say what's needed is legislation to increase state reimbursement rates, housing

stipends for direct care workers, and a campaign to educate political leaders about the crisis.

The alternative is a return to what Josephine Fennell, manager of day habilitation programs for Cape Abilities calls the “dark ages.” Without sufficient staffing, clients are losing the social and communication skills they’ve worked hard to learn. They are regressing, she said, adding that it is a disaster in the making.

Cape Abilities has a 35% vacancy rate in staff positions, according to CEO Kim McElholm. At Latham Centers, staff positions have been running between 20% and 30%, according to CEO Anne McManus and Board of Directors member Jack Kelly. And At Community Connections the vacancy rate is 18%, according to President and CEO David Botting.

Those vacancy rates have a snowball effect, said Kelly, whose son Drew is in an adult program at Latham Centers.

Low wages lead to higher staff vacancy rates. Higher vacancy rates lead to overtime and create a strain on direct care staff, which leads to staff turnover, he said.

“My son craves structure,” Kelly said. “When they lose a person, it’s not just an employee walking out the door.”

### **Depression among intellectually disabled clients increased**

Dr. Mark Hirsch, a behavioral analyst with NorthEast Health Services, has seen an increase in depression among clients as reflected by changes in appetite, sleep patterns and activity levels. Clients isolate themselves more often in their bedrooms. Their verbal skills decline.

“It’s just very difficult for them,” he said.

Hirsch and other disability advocates say direct care employees are not babysitters, they are professionals keeping the most vulnerable members of our society safe and involved in our communities. As such they deserve more money than state reimbursements allow, they said.

Hirsch writes behavior support plans for clients who show physical aggression, self-injury, property destruction, suicidal ideation, oppositional behavior, and poor impulse control.

“You name it; I write the positive support plans, and then train the staff to implement them,” he said.

It’s the staff’s responsibility to carry out those plans, he said. It’s also their responsibility to collect data for Hirsch and other doctors on a daily basis. That data is used to prescribe and adjust medications among other things.

“It involves quality of life for individuals,” Hirsch said. “They (direct care staff) implement behavior plans. They administer medications. They maintain safe environments for folks who can be unsafe. It requires a lot of training and skill development.”

## **Direct care employees' wages fell behind frontline workers' pay**

But it's hard to attract and retain a professional, dedicated staff when starting rates of pay at Cape organizations are in the \$16 to \$17 an hour range. Many grocery stores, retail shops and restaurants are paying higher hourly rates to Cape workers by comparison.

The state reimburses direct care staff at the Cape nonprofits about \$16.02 an hour. Most of the fundraising at Cape Abilities is done to provide staff with more money — bumping up the hourly pay closer to \$17.

"It's not apples to apples," McManus, CEO of Latham Centers, said about the pay discrepancy. "It's the benefits, vacation, health insurance, retirement and taxes. They (direct care staff) should be making \$25 to \$30 an hour."

Larry Thayer, retired CEO of Cape Abilities, agrees. "Twenty-five dollars an hour (\$52,000 a year) should be the range," he said.

In a November 2021 Op-Ed in the Times, Thayer pleaded for a solution to what he called long-standing pay discrepancies for direct care staff.

It won't be an easy fix, he admitted.

**Mass. state employees earn more due to union** Unlike traditional employees, direct care staffers for nonprofits are not unionized. The negotiating power of a large union means state employees get better rates on health insurance, for instance. Thayer tried to get his employees into the state health insurance program years ago because costs were rising so much that he had to offer high deductible plans to employees.

The retirement program for state workers is much better than it is for those working for nonprofits. And entry-level employees often don't have the ability to contribute to a retirement plan because they can't afford to, Thayer said.

State employees have guaranteed step increases, which employees at nonprofits don't have access to. All told there is a significant difference in the totality of the benefits package, Thayer said.

"We are at a crisis point now," he said. The pandemic, the ensuing real estate boom and the dearth of affordable housing have made it an even more drastic crisis. Direct care staff often work two to three jobs to make ends meet.

Lauren Griffiths, whose son Ryan lives in a group home and attended day programs before the pandemic hit, says a long-term solution to the problem requires legislation. Ryan hasn't attended a day program in two years because of staffing issues.

Ryan is being "warehoused," she said, like so many other individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

"If we told parents there were not enough teachers, there would be uproar," she said. "When there are not enough bus drivers, the National Guard was called in by (Gov.) Baker. It's such a crisis that some organizations are afraid they won't be able to stay open. And (disabled) students are aging out of public schools with no place to go."

An Act Relative to Fair Pay for Comparable Work, House Bill 237, was referred to the Committee on Children, Families and Persons with Disabilities last March. Three similar bills were introduced in the Legislature since 2017, with no resolution.

**The population of 25- to 44-year-olds expected to decline on Cape Cod** The crisis promises to get worse on the Cape. A study by the University of Massachusetts Donohue Institute projected a population decline among people 25 to 44 years old on Cape Cod through 2035 due in part to the high cost of living.

"We're expected to lose 24,000 people," Kelly said. "That's the working population. The macro picture is — things are tough in Massachusetts. They're tougher on the Cape because of affordable housing, the higher cost of living, and young people leaving."

Jean West is a behavior intervention specialist who has worked at Cape Abilities for 19 years. She owns her own home, but has to work more than 60 hours a week between two jobs to pay the bills, she said.

"If I was a young person starting out, I wouldn't be able to afford it," she said.

"We were unprepared for the staffing shortages," said Fennell. "Workers left during the pandemic and moved on. We had no applications for months and months."

Despite hiring campaigns, job fairs and \$1,000 signing bonuses, Cape Abilities was unable to fill all their openings. The \$16 to \$17 an hour wage to support a vulnerable population couldn't compete with Starbucks and Stop and Shop where workers could get \$18 an hour, Fennell said.

Before COVID, the day habilitation program had 100 members attending Monday through Friday. When the program initially reopened, 25 people were brought back.

Staffing is based on clients' behavior; so the higher the severity, the more assistance and staffing required. But COVID precautions meant space and social distancing requirements. Today there are 59 clients attending programs two to three days a week instead of five days a week.

Sen. Julian Cyr worries that even \$18 an hour isn't going to be enough of a difference because of the current housing market.

"I think it's absolutely essential that we push for a rate increase," he said. "I also think if we don't get aggressive about housing production, we won't have housing for the people who work here. It's all related."

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